



## Conference Paper

# The Voice of the Culture of Silent Majority: Naive Art and Literature

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**Abstract**

The article examines the museum interpretation of the creativity of artists representing the 'naive art' – an art differing from the academic canons. Creativity of naive artists can be seen as a manifestation of identity: cultural, ethnic, gender, and social one.

**Keywords:** naive art, cultural memory, life illusion, 'folk' ethnography, museum interpretation

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## 1. Introduction

Naive art as a cultural phenomenon is based more on the personal experiences and stories than on artistic styles, commissions or academic canons. Exhibitions of naive art create a meeting space between the artists' stories and the memory, experience and emotions of the viewers. Museum gives these stories a voice. Museum 'talks' naive, shows the visitors the stories about naive art collections, speaking in a collector's vernacular, showing ways and methods of working with artists and collections. This understanding of specific characteristics of the museum interpretation of naive art follows from the understanding of the essence and sources of this art.

Naive artworks are often biographical: they represent the artists' connection to the history of their country and the intersection between the fate of the artists and their home land – both the 'small' and the 'big' one. The pictures tell about the artists' life and character; they become illustrations of retrospective narratives implicitly told by the artists. The result is the emergence of a 'naive history' and 'folk ethnography', which sometimes outstrip academic research in their authenticity and fine attention to details. Of course, both textual and visual narratives of non-professional artists hold a certain amount of fiction, an improvised interpretation of their stories and characters. This, though, does not preclude their academic study and interpretation. But the main value of naive verbal-visual narratives is that they preserve information not about national historical events, but about the way these events are reflected in people's

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minds and become interpreted in representational practices of their time. An artist who reconstructs a supra-personal meaning of his or her life, views life events as fateful; the characters of their personal stories become prophets and messengers, and life in general is seen both as a fate and a trial.

## 2. The Concept of Naive Art

It is worth noting that naive art is not a depiction of the outside world, but its conceptualization, creation of a world picture. Despite their different techniques, naive artists conceptualize the reality in similar ways; however, they depict different subjects and different fragments of world picture. Therefore, naive pictoriality is a conceptualization of an individual world picture. Naive artists produce their own models of the world, completely coherent within their own experience. Therefore, they are sincere: they create a model of everything, but it is an everything as they know it.

These subjects are memories of events, experiences-reminiscences, spatial and material perceptions, behavioral modes, time. Naive art is a realization of a need to express oneself, to tell about one's own attitudes to the preserved experience and knowledge, interpreting it as a valuable heritage that deserves preservation and transmission. As such, naive art directly depends on an individual experience. This includes individual experience of basic values and landmark events. Narration is a tool for understanding and justifying individual experience. Maurice Halbvax stresses the important role that the stories heard from the older generation of the family play in widening the temporal horizon, which is conceptualized as a historical memory [3, p. 550]. Russian history created a situation where non-professional artists, whose childhood years spanned 1930s-1940s, were highly influenced by the break in 'family stories' and 'ancestral tales'. This happened due to a number of reasons: political repressions, starvation, fear to acknowledge connection to the 'wrong' ancestors: nobility, priests, victims of *dekulakization* or purges. The naive art, as an ego-history in its various artistic forms, is a certain prosthetic device for an identity, a saving finalization of life experience. Through their works, naive artists mend their memory gaps, constructing a holistic, coherent and meaningful story of their life.

The issue of spatial composition of the picture and the choice of a viewpoint that determines pictorial space is, among others, a problem of the artist's self-representation, his or her choice of position regarding the depicted events. When analyzing formal characteristics of these works, we pay attention to the particular features of composition and to the artist's chosen point of view 'from above' and

'over' an event. In real life, in drawing from nature, such compositions and viewpoints would be artificial and impossible. But here we have an art based not on 'impression' but on 'remembrance'; an image that recreates a memory of an event passed through the stories and verbal reflections.

The content of an artistic statement produced by a naive author, poet, artist or writer, is created and determined largely by the non-professional and non-institutional circumstances. What is particularly important both in art and in the biographies of naive artists, is no so much their lack of professional academic training, but rather the lack of an external controlling institution aligning artistic expression with the priorities of corporate institutional structures at the expense of personal and historical expression.

The content of naive artistic statements is aligned with History; it is tied to the individual experiences; it is based on the narrative way to memorize and structure impressions and to construct an image of past events. There is no question of authenticity, because the artist 'remembers' that everything happened just so. Composition of the past is based on the narrative and dramatic logic; the story is created by retrospectively stringing together meaningful memories in a coherent and logical narrative: logical in its outcomes. Naive art is an art of stitching and patching up, which connects historical memory and official narratives with ancestral memories, family lore, and individual events; it creates a seamless and unified canvas of life, of integrated memory [2, p. 551]. The main concepts that constitute and structure our reality are based on the narratives and narrative thinking: "time becomes a human time insofar as it is narratively articulated, and a narrative acquires its full meaning when it becomes a condition of a temporal existence" [3, p. 13].

### 3. The Features of Naive Narrative

Naive narratives are directly related to an individual experience, while occupying a special position regarding social experience and official 'grand' historical narratives. Narration is a tool for understanding and justifying individual experience. Narration, as an experience synchronized with the events themselves, develops based on the readily available and external language of science, society or media (this language creates pre-understanding). External and universal is structured as a narrative, with a vocabulary, rhetoric and storyline. Life is rethought as a storyline with characters, composition, mystery and a final outcome that 'provides all the answers'. Experience and perspective are viewed and, most importantly, constructed based on the dramatic rules, where each life collision is preserved in memory as a *mis-en-scene* and

a development of conflict. Understanding and emotional resonance of an experience also means development of a personal language of interpretation, which sometimes mimics mass clichés and ideological tropes.

Seen through the narrative nature of memory, naive art may be also interpreted as a manifestation of identity. Soviet identity was formed in the context of a Big Narrative, a *legitimizing metanarrative* that created not only the images of the correct 'bright new way' and of the spaces of 'wide motherland', but also the ways of looking on and seeing external events and phenomena, where 'seeing-as' incontrovertibly correlates with the 'being-as'. Those pre-formed and established 'ways of seeing' determine the style and the technique of painting, as well as the choice of tools borrowed from the professional art. In Soviet era, the connection between the personal and the collective responsibility was vitally important: responsibility for works, labor results and for the course of history. This provides a highly important benchmark against which non-professional artists develop their identities. The personal sphere of responsibility of Soviet people was constantly expanding, listing among individually meaningful events stories about feats of labor and arms, characters of contemporary political history, and famous cultural figures of the past. Naive artists combine in their art personal experience and emotions existing with the stereotypes of collective memory and myths of collective consciousness.

## 4. Conclusions

The art of naive artists is a manifestation of their identity. Researchers differentiate between a personal and a social identity, with such variations of social identity as local, ethnic, gender identity, etc. We ignore this difference, taking an individual as an agent of social relations and acknowledging the socially determined character of memory and its narrative nature. Identity is defined as a personally accepted meaning of an individual's position within the social system. In Soviet history, identity as a 'reflexively organized effort' is tied to the process through which rural residents were transformed into urban dwellers *en masse*; identity is a consequence of this revolutionary process. The events that change a person's social status (marriage, conscription, prison, change of job, change of residence), which so often happened to Soviet people, create important life-changing individual experiences – therefore, they become emotionally charged stories that are being reproduced in memory. Identity-building nature of naive art, as well as the other naive expressions of the history of Soviet people, is intensified

by the explosive and traumatic character of these processes in Russia. This trauma created a morbid-moribund joining of personal and collective memory.

Roman Ingarden views the end of the story as a factor that produces semantic meaning in the narrative sequence. Therefore, according to Ingarden, only a conclusion of the story makes it meaningful, and only a finished story becomes a source of its morphology [1, p. 30]. Naive art work is a *finalization* of life narrative imbuing it with sense and meaning.

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